

CHAPTER III.

THE WESTERN EMPIRE.

FINAL DIVISION OF THE EMPIRE; HONORIUS (A.D. 395-423) AND ARCADIUS (A.D. 395-408).—The two sons of Theodosius, Arcadius and Honorius, reigned respectively in the East and the West; and the two empires, after this division, were never again reunited. Theodosius had left to his sons a throne resplendent with glory; but of all the qualities of their great father they inherited only his goodness; and this goodness, unaccompanied by energy, was of little benefit to their subjects, as it failed to shelter them from the injustice of those who governed in the name of the emperors, or from the insults of enemies abroad. Hence the reign of these two princes is regarded as the beginning of the rapid decadence of the Roman power.

STILICHO.—Stilicho, prime minister of Honorius, though of obscure birth, had risen under Theodosius by rendering important services to the empire. He cloaked his vices under brilliant qualities: a spoliator yet generous, dissolute but brave, he won the affections of the soldiers by familiarity, often at the expense of discipline; his ruling passion was inordinate ambition, which impelled him, as it suited his

interests, in turn to betray or to serve his country. At first affairs prospered in his hands. Alaric, King of the Visigoths, who had long ravaged Illyria and Greece, was forced to flee. Stilicho might have destroyed him, but, fearing his own importance would diminish with peace, secretly negotiated with the king and allowed him to escape. Nor was this his only crime; he intrigued to dethrone the feeble Honorius, and solicited the Vandals and other barbarians to take up arms against his sovereign. He hoped that the confusion and tumult of war would pave the way to the throne for himself. The eyes of the emperor were at last opened. The soldiers, informed of the intrigues of Stilicho, became so enraged that they slew all his partisans. Stilicho fled to Ravenna and sought refuge in a church, but was decoyed out of it and condemned as a traitor to his prince and to his country. He was beheaded, thus terminating a brilliant though criminal career (A.D. 408).

INVASION OF GAUL AND SPAIN (A.D. 406-409).—The death of Stilicho did not save the empire from the invasion of the barbarians; they crossed the Rhine almost without opposition. The Germans settled along this river from Basle to Mayence. The Burgundians occupied Helvetia and the country stretching from the sources of the Seine and Loire. The Vandals ravaged all Gaul, so that this country, formerly

so flourishing, was covered with smoking ruins. After laying it waste, these barbarians poured into Spain and settled there, to the detriment of the Romans.

TAKING OF ROME BY ALARIC (A.D. 410).—Alaric, on the other hand, entered Italy. He was opposed by perfidy and perjury, for which he resolved to take revenge on the capital of the empire. Rome, after suffering the horrors of famine during a protracted siege, surrendered. The victor abandoned the city to his soldiery, who were nearly all pagans or Arians. The slaughter was frightful; only those were spared who took refuge in the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul. To rapine were added the terrors of fire. As if Heaven itself was armed to chastise this haughty queen of the world, a furious tempest accompanied the ravages of the Goths; the lightning destroyed several temples and reduced to ashes the idols formerly worshipped, and which the Christian emperors had allowed to remain as ornaments to the city. Religion gloriously survived amid the general ruin; the precious vessels belonging to the church of St. Peter were solemnly borne by the conquerors themselves to that church. On the way the Christians hastened from all quarters and joined the barbarians, singing hymns and forming a kind of military or triumphal procession, which offered a striking contrast to the surrounding horrors.

THE VISIGOTHS IN GAUL AND SPAIN.—Thus Rome lost in one day that splendor which had made her the first city of the world. She still existed; but once humbled by Alaric, she became the sport and prey of the barbarians, and the majesty of the Roman name was blasted for ever. Alaric was absolute master in Italy. His intention was to cross over to Africa, and to settle with his people in that vast country; but death ended his projects and delivered the empire from an enemy whom it was then unable to resist. With the consent of Honorius, the Visigoths under the successor of Alaric occupied the provinces of Spain and Gaul nearest to the Pyrenees. The emperor spent the rest of his reign, as he had begun, in shameful inaction.

LOSS OF BRITAIN.—Britain, laid waste by the Picts and Scots, solicited help in vain; abandoned by its protectors, it was lost to the empire, and, some years later, fell into the hands of the Angles and Saxons. According to several historians, the foundation of the French monarchy was begun in the latter days of the reign of Honorius. The Franks, under Pharamond, their king, crossed the Rhine in A.D. 420 and settled on the Meuse, in the environs of Tongres.

VALENTINIAN III. (A.D. 424-455).—Honorius died without issue, and the crown devolved on Theodosius the Younger, son of Arcadius, then emperor of the East; but he ceded it to Valenti-



nian III., son of Placidia, his aunt. This princess, daughter of the great Theodosius, inspired the new emperor, still a child, with a horror for heresy and a respect for the Church. These estimable qualities, however, could not compensate for an inert and effeminate disposition. Hence Valentinian was always the opponent of Arianism, without ever being a Christian. Cradled in the lap of luxury, he took no part in the events of his reign.

ÆTIUS AND BONIFACE.—The general of his army was Ætius, a great captain and an astute politician, who saved the empire but made the emperor tremble. He wished to be sole ruler, but had a formidable rival in Boniface, governor of Africa, as brave and perhaps as able as Ætius himself, and greatly superior to him in moderation, disinterestedness, and justice. Ætius, resolving to destroy Boniface, secretly sent him word that the Empress Placidia had sworn his destruction, that she was about to recall him to court, and that if he left Africa his death was inevitable. At the same time he went to Placidia and assured her that Boniface had conceived the design of rendering himself independent in Africa. "To unmask his treason," said he, "order him to return to the court; he will not obey, and thereby you will have the right to treat him as a rebel." Placidia, too credulous, followed the counsel of Ætius. Boniface, acting on the



treacherous advice that had been given him, refused to obey, raised troops, and, in the effort to assert his innocence, became in fact guilty. Some time after Placidia and Boniface discovered the knavery of Ætius; but the mischief was irreparable. Placidia dared not punish Ætius, who was more powerful than herself in the empire.

THE VANDALS IN AFRICA (A.D. 429).—Boniface had invited the Vandals from Spain into Africa. On his return to duty he was no longer able to drive them out. These barbarians, Arians in religion and commanded by Genseric, a brave but sanguinary chief and the mortal enemy of the Catholics, poured like a torrent into Africa, and filled it with ruins and carnage. All writers of that time agree in regarding the desolation of Africa as an effect of divine vengeance. That country was the most corrupt on earth; drunkenness, perjury, murder, and blasphemy prevailed, and to these were joined excesses which made that vast country another Sodom. The Vandals wiped out these abominations in the blood of the Africans (A.D. 439).

ATTILA.—In the meantime there arose an enemy more formidable to the Romans than the Vandals; this was the ferocious Attila, king of the Huns. His dominion extended over those immense countries which on one side lie between the Baltic and the Black Sea, or Pontus Euxinus,



and on the other stretch beyond the Caspian Sea and form what is now called Chinese Tartary. Born to shake empires and to hurl to the ends of the earth the thunderbolts of divine wrath, he called himself the "Scourge of God." He was hideous in person; had an immense head, small, glittering eyes, a flat nose, a swarthy complexion, and a stern and haughty bearing.

BATTLE OF CHALONS (A.D. 451).—Followed by half a million of warriors, this ferocious conqueror traversed the provinces watered by the Danube, from its mouth to its source, captured Tongres, Rheims, Arras, and all the other cities in his passage, and laid siege to Orleans. There Aëtius, with Theodoric, King of the Visigoths, and Merovæus, King of the Franks, stayed the ravages of Attila. He was surprised at the moment when, having just entered the city, he was beginning to pillage it. All the Huns in the city were taken and killed or cast into the Loire. Attila, burning with rage, rallied his barbarian hordes and retraced his way along the Rhine. Aëtius followed and came up with him in the vast plains that lie between the Seine and the Marne. Never had Europe seen two such immense armies face to face. The fields, bristling with steel as far as the eye could reach, presented a martial aspect; and soon they were deluged with the blood of the combatants. The Visigoths lost their king, but they had the chief



share in winning the victory. After having forced the left wing of the Huns, they attacked the main body so vigorously that Attila, terrified for the first time in his life, yielded to the Romans and their allies. The battle-field was strewn with one hundred and eighty thousand corpses.

ATTILA IN ITALY.—After this battle, the bloodiest recorded in history, Attila, unable to attempt anything further, retreated to his native wilds in Hungary. In the following year, however, this relentless warrior revenged his defeat by laying waste the northern part of Italy. Many of the inhabitants took refuge in the islands of the Adriatic Sea, and founded the city of Venice. Aëtius with his handful of troops could no longer stay the march of Attila; but Pope St. Leo, armed with an invisible power, boldly appeared before the king of the Huns, and prevailed upon him to retire. Shortly after, to the joy of all mankind, this fierce conqueror died of debauchery; and the vast empire that he had founded disappeared with him (A.D. 453).

DEATH OF AËTIUS (A.D. 454) AND VALENTINIAN III. (A.D. 455).—Aëtius soon followed Attila to the grave, having perished by an intrigue similar to those he had employed against his enemies. Valentinian was induced to believe that he was engaged in a conspiracy. Thereupon the unsuspecting general was summoned to the



palace; on seeing him, the emperor, without demanding any explanation, drew his sword and plunged it into his breast. By this summary execution Valentinian deprived himself of his sole defender against his enemies. Several months afterwards he was assassinated in his palace; and Genseric, King of the Vandals, under pretext of avenging the emperor, gave up Rome to pillage (A.D. 455).

INFLUENCE OF RICIMER AND WEAKNESS OF THE LAST EMPEROR.—After the death of Valentinian III. and of his successor, who barely mounted the throne, all authority fell into the hands of Ricimer, a barbarian by birth. He was bold and energetic, equally capable of heroic deeds and foul crimes; intrepid in peril, fruitful in expedients, eloquent, adroit, insinuating, but destitute of probity and knowing no law but his own ambition. Thrice he could have seized the crown, but he preferred to bestow it on the phantoms of royalty whom he at will successively raised up and cast down. Eight emperors perished or were deposed in twenty years. Several possessed ability, and in peaceful times might have reigned with glory. Avitus, Majorian, and Anthemius were as notable for moral qualities as for military talents. But they committed the unpardonable fault, in the eyes of Ricimer, of wishing to reign alone, which he punished by a bloody death. These massacres and frequent



revolutions did not hinder him from vigorously repulsing the barbarians who attempted to complete the dismemberment of the empire, which was now reduced to the narrow limits of Italy. Death alone put an end to the victories and enormities of Ricimer (A.D. 472).

ROMULUS AUGUSTULUS AND ODOACER; FALL OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE (A.D. 476).—The last emperor by a singular coincidence bore the names of the founders of Rome and of the Empire, Romulus Augustus. The Romans, either through contempt or on account of his youth, commonly called him Augustulus (A.D. 475). At this time the people, commingling with the barbarians, no longer acknowledged any country. Without loyalty to princes who were unable to defend them, and who, like phantoms, appeared but to vanish, they had lost all fear of revolutions by reason of their incessant recurrence.

At this gloomy epoch Odoacer, King of the Heruli, overthrew the tottering throne. Augustulus, utterly deserted, laid aside the purple. The conqueror, through compassion for his age, granted him his life, and gave him an honorable retreat near Naples. Rome submitted to her new master; and the barbarians, dispersing throughout Italy, took full possession of it (A.D. 476). By this revolution the Western Empire fell, 507 years after the battle of Actium and 1,229 years from the founding of Rome. Its fall had long



been impending and was scarcely felt by the rest of the world. It was like the death of a veteran who, deprived of strength and the use of his members, expires through sheer languor.

PROLONGED EXISTENCE OF THE EASTERN EMPIRE (A.D. 395-1453).—The East, under the title of the Lower or Greek Empire, being less exposed than the West to the attacks of the barbarians, survived longer and displayed more energy. If several of the emperors were weak, effeminate, and incapable, there were others who to valor joined talent for government, and whose abilities more than once upheld the state when on the brink of ruin. The Saracens in the seventh century inflicted a deep wound upon the empire. In the following centuries the Turks seized successively all the provinces of Asia, then those of Europe; and they had long confined it within the walls of Constantinople when their sultan, Mahomet II., dealt the last blow and annihilated it by taking that capital (1453). This empire had lasted 1,484 years from the battle of Actium, or 2,206 years if we reckon from the foundation of Rome.

REVIEW QUESTIONS.

How was Theodosius succeeded? What is said of the prime minister of Honorius? Describe the invasions of the Germans, Burgundians, Vandals. Describe the taking of Rome by Alaric. What is



said of Alaric and the Visigoths after the capture of Rome? What of Britain at this time? France? What is said of the successor of Honorius? What was the character of Aëtius? What is said of his relations with Boniface? What of the Vandals in Africa at this time? What of the first appearance of the "Scourge of God"? Describe his march and the battle of Chalons. What is said of his descent upon Italy? How did Aëtius end his life? What is said of the rule of Ricimer? What of the last emperor of Rome? Of Odoacer? How was the Empire continued in the East? Who was its final conqueror?